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ABSTRACT

This paper places research findings within a social learning framework to demonstrate that television influences the development of sex typing in children. First, the presence of sex-typed content in television programming and advertising is documented. Then, the nature of children's attention to and comprehension of televised messages is reviewed. Finally, behavioral effects after exposure to sex-typed television content are examined. Although children can learn both traditional and nontraditional values from television viewing, research findings clearly document that for the past 30 years, television content has overwhelmingly reinforced children for adopting traditional sex roles. Recommendations are offered for moderating these effects. (Author/RH)

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The Influence of Television on Children's Sex Typing

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Running Head: Television and Sex Typing

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The Influence of Television on Children's Sex Typing

Abstract

Social learning theory is used as a framework to examine the impact of television on children's sex-typed behaviors and attitudes. The presence of sex-typed content in television programming and advertising is documented. Then children's attention to, and comprehension of, televised messages are reviewed. Finally, behavioral effects after exposure to sex-typed television content is examined. Although children can learn both traditional and nontraditional values from television viewing, research findings clearly document that for the past 30 years, television content has overwhelmingly reinforced children for adopting traditional sex roles. Recommendations are offered for moderating these effects.

The Influence of Television on Children's Sex Typing

> The Queen is at the market buying bread and honey. . .
> the King is at the office working for the money.[1]

Twenty years ago, sex-typing -- the process of adopting societally-sanctioned, gender-appropriate behavior patterns (Mischel, 1970) -- was considered a desirable outcome of the socialization process (Huston, 1983). More recently, some parents and developmentalists have questioned this goal since sex-typing can limit role choices and restrict behavior unnecessarily (Bem & Lenney, 1976). Despite this controversy, children continue to be exposed to sex-typed values and behavior through television, a major socialization agent in our culture.

Sex-typed values can be conveyed through parents, teachers, peers, and mass media, like television. Social learning theory, centered around the concept of modeling, provides a framework for evaluating how these social agents influence children. Modeling is the process by which children imitate the behavior of others, seen either in person, on film, or on videotape (Bandura, 1977). Bandura's extensive work in the 1960's and 1970's demonstrated the powerful effects of both live and filmed models on young children's behavior. Patterns of aggression (e.g., Bandura, Ross, & Ross, 1961, 1963a, 1963b), self-reward (e.g., Bandura, Grusec, & Menlove, 1967a), moral judgements (e.g., Bandura & McDonald, 1963), and fear (e.g., Bandura, Grusec, & Menlove, 1967b) have

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[1] 1950's trade paper advertisement reprinted in the Journal of Communication, 1974, 24, 102.

been altered through modeling. This paper will use social learning theory to examine the impact of television programming on the development of sex typing in children.

Social Learning Theory

Social learning theory stresses a distinction between learning and performance; more specifically, children can learn modelled behavior without physically performing the behavior. For example, Bandura (1965) demonstrated that all children learned aggressive behavior that had been modeled on a film, but performance depended on the perceived and actual environmental consequences for imitating the behavior. When children observed a model receive punishment for a behavior, they did not imitate the behavior; however, if these same children were later offered a reward for the behavior, imitation occurred. This suggests that sex role attitudes and information about sex roles and stereotypic behavior could be learned from television, but the overt performance of sex stereotypic behavior would depend on the perceived and actual consequences of such behavior within particular environments such as homes or schools.

Four basic steps are involved in the modelling process. First, a model must present the target behavior, in this case, sex stereotypic behavior. Second, children must attend to the model. Third, children must encode information about the modelled behavior, store this information, and retrieve it -- in other words, comprehend and remember it. Finally, children must imitate the model by performing the modelled behavior (Bandura, 1977). This paper will follow these basic steps to

examine the influence of television on children's sex-stereotyped attitudes and behaviors.

Presentation of Sex Stereotypes on Television

In American culture, men are stereotyped as powerful, dominant, and unemotional while women are stereotyped as weak and emotional. Sex stereotypes are presented on television in three major areas. First, the sheer presence of more men than women suggests that they are the dominant sex. Second, women and men are portrayed in stereotypic fashion throughout the television medium. Third, the occupational roles portrayed for women and men are stereotypical.

Ratio of Males to Females on Television

Throughout the history of television, more men than women have been portrayed in major television roles. Because children view more adult than children's television programs (Adler, Lesser, Meringoff, Robertson, Rossiter, & Ward, 1980), both types of programming will be presented.

As early as 1954, Head analyzed a sample of adult, prime-time, evening shows. Of the 1,023 major characters observed, 68% were men and 32% were women. In the same year, Smythe (1954) noted that in dramatic television programs, men outnumbered women 2 to 1. During the 1960's, the situation became even more extreme: men held 3 times as many major roles as women (Gerbner, 1972). The women's movement of the late sixties and seventies had little impact on the male-female ratio. Lemon (1977) found that only 28% of major television characters were female.

Out of 14 crime dramas observed, only four had a regular female character.

In a comparison of prime-time and day-time programming, Turow (1974) documented that men and women were more equally represented on daytime television, probably because such programs are targeted to women. On prime time television, 70% of the characters were men and 30% were women; on daytime programs, 54% of characters were men while 46% were women. Courtney and Whipple (1974) made a similar comparison for television advertising. During daytime advertisements, women outnumbered men as product representatives, but men outnumbered women during prime-time advertisements. More importantly, men far outnumbered women as the "voice of authority" in both daytime and prime-time commercials: in particular, males narrated 87-89% of the off-screen scripts, designed to sell the products (Courtney & Whipple, 1974; Dominick & Rauch, 1972).

Television programs specifically designed for children are as sex-stereotyped as adult, prime-time programs. Sternglanz and Serbin (1974) viewed 10 popular children's programs. Half of the shows in their original sample were replaced because they had no female characters whatsoever. Of the 147 characters finally observed, 67% were male and 33% female. Similarly, McArthur and Eisen (1976) reported that 68% of central characters on network Saturday morning shows were male and 32% female. Nolan, Galst and White (1977) noted even more extreme ratios: males represented 74% and females 26% of all characters on the three major networks and public television during Saturday morning

programming. Within Saturday morning and weekday afternoon cartoons, Streicher (1974) found many all-male cartoons, but no all-female cartoons.

Commercials for children are more stereotyped than those for adults. During Saturday morning programs, advertisements feature 80% male characters and 20% female with 85% of the narration being male (McArthur & Eisen, 1976). Feldstein and Feldstein (1982) examined children in toy commercials over two Christmas seasons. In 1977, 68% of the commercials featured one or more boys with 55% showing one or more girls. By 1978, boys fared even better -- 83% of toy commercials featured at least one boy; girls remained the same -- they were present in 55% of the commercials.

In summary, men have outnumbered women 2 or 3 to 1 in most types of television programs and advertisements for the past 30 years. The overrepresentation of men gives the false impression that there are more men than women in the United States when in fact the actual proportion of men to women is 49% to 51%, respectively (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1984). Rather than accurately reflecting numerical proportions, the overrepresentation of men on television mirrors their power base in our society (Gerbner, 1972). This attribution of power to men is further reinforced by their predominance as the "voice of authority" in commercials. These portrayals reinforce traditional attitudes that men are more important than women.

Characteristics of Males and Females on Television

Women on television are portrayed as youthful (Dominick & Rauch, 1972; Smythe, 1954), emotional (Harris & Voorhees, 1981), inactive (Feldstein & Feldstein, 1982; Sternglanz & Serbin, 1974), and deferent (Lemon, 1977; Tedesco, 1974; Turow, 1974). They are more often married and portrayed in familial roles than are men (Courtney & Whipple, 1974; Tedesco, 1974). If women are given a lead role, it is more likely to be in a situation comedy than in a dramatic or action-adventure program (Tedesco, 1974). Women are not involved in problem-solving situations during programming (Downs & Gowan, 1980), and they are given the product-user role in commercials rather than the product representative role assumed by males (Courtney & Whipple, 1974). Men, on the other hand, are generally single (Tedesco, 1974), older (Dominick & Rauch, 1972; Smythe, 1954), active (Feldstein & Feldstein, 1982; Sternglanz & Serbin, 1974), aggressive (Tedesco, 1974), unemotional (Harris & Voorhees, 1981), and more authoritative in television roles than are women (Courtney & Whipple, 1974; Dominick & Rauch, 1972; Turow, 1974). In short, models of competent women are rarely presented for young girls and at the same time, models of nurturant, expressive men are rarely presented for young boys.

Having feelings is one of the most important aspects of being human, yet we are teaching young boys to deny suppress tender affect. When Harris and Voorhees (1981) classified the emotions of male and female characters, 75% of females were rated "happy" and 17% "unhappy" compared to 57% and 13%, respectively, for males. Only 8% of females

displayed no emotion but 30% of males were rated as having no emotion. Downs (1981) reported that women displayed emotional distress and cried more than men on television. The message is that emotional expression, particularly crying, is weak and "unmanly". Both sexes lose in television portrayals, for neither sex is allowed to explore their full range of human potential.

Occupational Roles of Males and Females on Television

In spite of real-life data to the contrary, housewife has been the largest single occupation for women on television for the past 30 years (Downs, 1981; Smythe, 1954; Tedesco, 1974). From 1920 to the 1970's, the percentage of women between the ages of 18 and 64 in the labor force increased from 24% to over 50%. By 1970, women represented 40% of the total U. S. labor force (Tuchman, 1978).

Smythe (1954) found that all female villians worked and that female heroes were at home, suggesting that "good women" stay home. In television commercials, Courtney and Whipple (1974) found that women were seen in the family and home while men were portrayed in professional roles. Men appeared in twice as many occupations as women in these commercials. Dominick and Rauch (1972) found that 38% of female characters in commercials while only 14% of male characters were in the home; men were more likely than women to be seen outdoors or in a business setting. Recent studies show no improvement. McArthur and Eisen (1976), Downs (1981) and Harris and Voorhees (1981) found that men continued to be shown in work situations while women remained at home.

Defleur (1964) compared 436 occupational portrayals of men and women on television to real-life census figures for the state of Indiana and found that both men and women on television were overrepresented in professional and managerial occupations. Women on television were comparably represented in clerical jobs relative to actual census figures, but underrepresented in sales, operations and service careers. Female television characters were overrepresented as craftsmen and household workers. On the other hand, men were underrepresented in clerical, agricultural, sales, craftsmen and operations but overrepresented in service and household jobs like butlers, as compared to their real-life occupations. Among total television workers, 84% were men and 16% women; in the state of Indiana, 69% of the work force were men and 31% were women.

Seggar and Wheeler (1973) reported similar results when they analyzed 1,830 television characters. The four most common occupations for television women were nurse, secretary, entertainer, and maid while the four most probable occupations for television men were policeman, physician, musician and government diplomat.

In summary, men are portrayed in a greater variety of occupational roles than women on television; in fact, women are often not given any occupational role. Thus, young boys are provided with numerous occupational role models while young girls are exposed to the role model of housewife or a limited number of stereotyped female occupational roles. Stereotyped television portrayals may discourage children from pursuing diverse occupational roles. As Caroline Bird (1971) commented,

the problem with television is that it "does not present human models for a bright 13-year-old [girl] who would like to grow up to be something more than an ecstatic floor waxer" (p. 6).

Children's Attention to Television

For children to learn these television stereotypes, they must first attend to them. Children between the ages of 2 and 5 years spend an average of 4 hours per day watching television. Between the ages of 6 and 11, children view an average of more than 3 1/2 hours per day. Children watch more televison than adolescents, working women over 18, and men under the age of 55. (Adler et al., 1980, p. 15) Thus, they are clearly being exposed to sex stereotypes.

We know that children don't normally watch television with eyes glued to the set -- while viewing, they tend to engage in other activities, like playing with peers and toys (Comstock, Note 1). The amount of visual attention paid to television programs increases as a function of age. According to Anderson and Lorch (1983), a sharp increase occurs in visual attention to television from 1 year to 2 1/2 years of age because children have developed schemes for watching television. That is, active strategies are developed which influence children's visual attention to television content. Anderson and Lorch (1983) suggest that children use peers and auditory features from television programs to cue their visual attention to comprehensible program content. Comprehensible programming increases attention and incomprehensible programming decreases visual attention. Thus, children should attend closely to programming directed at their cognitive level.

As children mature, they should understand and attend more to programming. For example, kindergartners and first graders attended 42% of the time to children's television programs while third and fourth graders attended 53% of the time (Wright, Huston, Ross, Calvert, Rollandelli, Weeks, Raeissi, & Potts, 1984).

Perceptually-salient stimuli can increase children's attention. Perceptual salience refers to stimulus qualities which, according to Berlyne (1960), enhance selective attention and direct orienting responses. These stimulus qualities include intensity, novelty, change, complexity, contrast, surprise, uncertainty, incongruity, and conflict. Applied to television, certain formal production techniques like sound effects, action, and loud music, exemplify perceptual salience. Both children's programs (Huston, Wright, Wartella, Rice, Watkins, Campbell, & Potts, 1981) and commercials (Adler et al., 1980) contain high levels of perceptually-salient formal features. Such formal features enhance attention to television programs and can mark certain content for further processing (Calvert, Huston, Watkins, & Wright, 1982). More specifically, children learn to use certain formal features to guide attention to critical content in television programming. As Greer, Potts, Wright, and Huston (1982) reported, children attend more to advertisements with high levels of perceptualy-salient features than to advertisements with low levels of such features.

In summary, the empirical evidence suggests that children do indeed attend to television. As they become familiar with the medium, they use strategies to guide their selective attention to essential parts of

programs. Further, they show more attention to the type of features which are highly used in children's programs and commercials, the formats that are the most sex-stereotyped on television.

Children's Comprehension of Television Content

When children attend to television, do they remember it at a later point in time? Any parent would probably respond "yes", as they have heard children singing product jingles, seen them emulating character heroes, and listened to their children begging for the purchase of specific products advertised on television. On the surface, this informal observation appears to be supported (Adler et al., 1980, pp. 133-137; Burr & Burr, 1977).

Anderson and Lorch (1983) describe television viewing as "an active cognitive transaction between the young viewer, the television, and the viewing environment" (p. 6). Huston and Wright (1983) suggested that active processing is guided by schemas or mental structures which develop as a result of children's real-world and television world experiences. This knowledge base, in turn, guides the comprehension process by leading children to have expectations that are consistent with those experiences.

Schemas can enhance comprehension if they are similar to the message conveyed. For example, Calvert (Note 2) demonstrated that preplays of basic plot information presented before a program increased children's inferential comprehension by providing a scheme or organizing structure.

On the other hand, schemas can interfere with accurate comprehension when television content violates children's expectations (Collins, 1983). For example, Cordua, McGraw, and Drabman (1979) presented young children with videotapes of a male nurse and female doctor. When later recalling the occupations of the male and female, children reversed the roles, reporting the female as the nurse and the male as the doctor. This research suggests that when television consistently presents sex-stereotyped portrayals, expectancies may be established in boys and girls which, in turn, affect their encoding, storage or recall about roles of men and women. Children may require exposure to numerous nonstereotypical portrayals to alter these expectancies.

Specific strategies could aid children's comprehension of infrequently presented, nonstereotypical television portrayals. For example, sound effects could highlight nonstereotypical portrayals, thereby increasing attention to specific program points (Calvert & Gersh, Note 3; Calvert et al., 1982). Adults can also label nonstereotypical portrayals for children, thereby enhancing their comprehension (Collins, Sobol, & Westby, 1981; Freidrich & Stein, 1975; Watkins, Calvert, Huston-Stein, & Wright, 1980). Parents should be encouraged to view with their children and verbally label nonstereotypical role portrayals.

In summary, children's comprehension of television is an active process, guided by schemas and expectations based on prior viewing and general social knowledge. Constant exposure to sex-stereotypical

portrayals may establish expectancies that bias comprehension of television content. The inclusion of more nonstereotypical portrayals, the use of production techniques to highlight those nonstereotypical portrayals, and the active involvement of parents in verbally labelling information for children can increase children's accurate comprehension.

Imitating the Model

The final step in the modeling process is the actual behavioral effect -- exhibiting altered behavior or attitudes as a result of exposure to the model. There are two types of studies which have linked exposure to television stereotypes with stereotypic attitutes and behaviors in children. First, correlational studies link high television viewing with high sex-stereotyping. Secondly, short-term experimental manipulations expose children to sex-stereotyped television programming and then examine children's sex-typed behaviors or attitudes.

Correlational Studies

Since television typically presents content that is highly sex-stereotyped, the basic strategy of correlational studies has been to relate total amount of television viewing with measures of sex-stereotyping or to examine if high and low viewers differ on measures of sex-stereotyping. For example, Beuf (1974) asked 3-year-old boys and girls about their career aspirations when they grew up. Children who watched less television chose sex-stereotyped careers 50% of the time whereas heavy viewers chose sex-stereotyped careers 76% of the time.

Frueh and McGhee (1975) found that among boys and girls in kindergarten, second, fourth, and sixth grades, heavy viewers who watched 25 or more hours per week had stronger traditional sex-role development than light viewers who watched 10 hours or less per week. In a follow-up study, McGhee and Frueh (1980) noted that 80% of the children had retained their original viewing pattern. Using only the children with stable viewing patterns who were now in first, third, fifth, and seventh grades, they found a link between heavy viewing and higher sex-stereotyped perceptions. They also discovered a significant interaction between grade and viewing: heavy viewers increased in sex-stereotyping as grade increased, and light viewers decreased as grade increased. Thus, heavy television viewing was associated with increased sex-stereotyping over time.

Experimental Evidence

Several experimental studies have demonstrated that even brief exposure to television can produce changes in sex-stereotypic attitudes or behaviors. Davidson, Yasuna, and Tower (1979) showed Saturday-morning cartoons to 5- and 6-year-old girls. One group watched a reverse sex-stereotype program, one watched a neutral program (which turned out to be fairly sex-stereotyped), and one group watched a highly sex-stereotyped program. Girls who viewed the reverse sex-stereotype program had significantly lower sex-stereotyping scores than did the other two groups.

Cobbs, Stevens-Long, and Goldstein (1982) examined children's play with toys that were labeled as sex appropriate or inappropriate. Each child viewed one of three videotapes. Each videotape had 15 minutes of Sesame Street programming with a 5-minute experimental segment inserted in the middle. The experimental segment featured a male and female muppet discussing the sex appropriateness of a set of four sex-neutral toys. The first group saw the muppets label the toys for boys; the second group saw the muppets label the toys for girls; and the third group watched the toys labeled for both boys and girls. After viewing, children played with the toys labeled as sex-appropriate more frequently than they played with toys labeled as sex-inappropriate. By using boys exclusively in many toy commercials, advertisers may be implicitly labeling these toys as sex-appropriate for boys and, thereby, teaching girls not to play with them.

McArthur and Eisen (1976) exposed nursery-school children to traditional or reverse sex-stereotyped portrayals. All children saw a 9-minute videotape in which a man and a woman each performed four specific behaviors. In the traditional-sex-stereotype condition, the woman performed "feminine" behaviors and the man performed "masculine" behaviors. In the reverse condition, the man performed "feminine" behaviors and the woman performed "masculine" behaviors. After viewing, children were observed in a play situation. Both boys and girls viewing the traditional sex-stereotyped videotape exhibited more sex-stereotypic behavior and those viewing the reverse-stereotype videotape exhibited more cross-sex behavior. Both boys and girls recalled activities better

that had been performed by the same-sex model regardless of the traditional versus reverse roles. That is, girls recalled best what the female model did and boys recalled best what the male model did whether "feminine" or "masculine" behaviors were being performed.

The television program Freestyle was developed specifically to alter children's sex-role attitudes. These programs focused on non-traditional interests of boys and girls in the 9-12-year age range and related these interests to educational and occupational choices. Attitude questionnaires were given to 9-12-year-olds before and after viewing the 13 episodes of the program. After exposure, both boys and girls became more accepting of cross-sex or nontraditional activities for boys and girls, non-traditional occupational roles for men and women, and non-traditional familial roles for males and females (Liebert, Sprafkin, & Davidson, 1982).

In summary, both the correlational and experimental research link television viewing with sex-stereotyped attitudes and behaviors. The correlational studies indicate a positive relationship between the amount of television viewed and sex-stereotyped attitudes: that is, the more television viewed by children, the stronger their sex-stereotyped attitudes. The experimental studies demonstrate that even brief exposure to television can either increase or decrease sex-typed attitudes and behaviors. The direction of that effect depends on the type of program viewed. This suggests that we can either continue to perpetuate traditional sex roles or we can present alternative role models for boys and girls through the medium of television.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This paper has placed research findings within a social learning framework to demonstrate that television influences the development of sex-typing in children. Children attend to televised models for long periods of time each day and they understand at least some of the messages presented. Moreover, attitudinal and behavioral changes occur as a result of viewing sex-stereotypic or reverse-stereotypic television. The fact that these findings have been replicated extensively lends credence to the conclusions.

Television mirrors cultural values. While many people in the United States choose traditional sex-role values, alternatives should be presented for those who do not. By the age of 17, children have spent as much time watching television as attending school (Surgeon General's Report, 1972). Choices in programming, or a lack thereof, will mold the character of our children and their future.

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